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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

First session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 1st MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 30 September 1991, at 10.30 a.m.

Temporary Chairman: Mr. MARTENSON (Under-Secretary-General
for Human Rights)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.45 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION

Mr. MARTENSON (Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights), speaking on behalf of the Secretary-General, delared open the first session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and welcomed all participants.

The international effort to define and defend the fundamental rights of all the world's children, which had begun in 1924 with the adoption of the Geneva Declaration by the League of Nations, had resulted in the convening of a group of distinquished international experts that was beginning its work today. It was fitting to pay tribute at present to the collective determination of generations of visionaries, men and women who had worked long and hard to establish the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and to fashion a universal instrument that would frame the rights of the child as binding obligations in international law. The dedication of those pioneers would inspire all present to work to the very best of their abilities for the rights, interests and welfare of the world's children.

The promotion and protection of human rights was one of the primary purposes of the United Nations and was seen as one of the most important avenues for ushering in a world of justice, freedom and peace. With children constituting nearly half of all humanity, it was evident that efforts to promote their dignity, well-being and development were absolutely fundamental to the achievement of the purposes set out in the Charter.

The susceptibility of children to abuse and exploitation lent a special urgency to such efforts. Far too many were subjected to forced labour, sold into slavery and prostitution, victimized by armed conflict, condemned to illiteracy or left starving in a world of plenty. Millions of children, the innocent victims of discrimination, would never realize their full potential because they were members of certain ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, migrant worker families or simply because they were poor. A great many had perhaps never heard of the rights of the child; now, however, the Convention on the Rights of the Child provided a tool to help give such disadvantaged children a better life.

The Committee would be the main focal point of international efforts to translate those rights into national law and practice. The consideration of State party reports would generate important information about the actual situation of children and the observance of their rights. Over the years, the Committee would have opportunities to establish and maintain a constructive dialogue with the representatives of Governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations about major problems affecting children. It would be in a unique position to identify problems preventing the full enjoyment of children's rights and to point out possible solutions. Through its monitoring efforts, it would give crucial support and new impetus to the international and grass-roots-level programmes of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

In carrying out its mandate, the Committtee would need strong support and cooperation, not only from the States parties to the Convention, but also from a variety of organizations working to improve the lot of children. It would need expert advice about the implementation of the Convention, including accurate and up-to-date information about the problems facing children and how such problems could best be addressed. It would play an important role in mobilizing resources to respond to the needs that had been identified and in facilitating the provision of special assistance from international agencies and non-governmental organizations. He had therefore been pleased to note that the two informal consultative meetings on the rights of the child, hosted by the Centre for Human Rights in early 1991, had seen warm declarations of interest and support for the Committee's work from all the agencies concerned.

Facilitating and monitoring the effective implementation of the Convention would clearly not be an easy task. The unprecedented speed with which the Convention had entered into force and the equally phenomenal pace and scope of the ratification process were strong indications of the international community's high expectations of the Committee. It was also clear that many States were in need of guidance and assistance and wanted results.

One of the first priorities in implementing the Convention would be to ensure that the rights of the child were incorporated into legislation as a guide for national policy affecting children. Beyond that, organizational structures must be established at the national and local levels to help focus attention on the implementation of the rights of the child and suggest new initiatives and evaluate results. In each country and community, efforts should be made to identify the institutions and bodies, including non-governmental organizations, that could be called upon to make the rights of the child and the Convention better known among government officials, professional organizations, the general public and especially among children themselves.

The Committee might wish to consider focusing initially on encouraging specific and practical programmes for improving the situation of children, particularly vulnerable groups such as the extremely poor, minorities, indigenous groups, children without parents, refugee children, street children and disabled children. The Committee would also no doubt wish to stimulate improvements in the effectiveness of international, regional and national efforts to protect children from dangers to which they were especially vulnerable, such as child labour, the sale, trafficking and abduction of children, drug abuse and other forms of exploitation and neglect. To change the actual living conditions of children, new resources would have to be forthcoming from Governments and international organizations. Activities designed to increase awareness of children's needs and to ensure that they were given higher priority in national and international budgets would be of great importance in that regard.

The enjoyment by children of their basic rights depended to a large extent on the enjoyment of human rights in society as a whole: a child could only be truly free in a free society, truly healthy in healthy community and truly safe in a safe environment. Goals and strategies designed to promote the child's well-being and development must form part of efforts to improve

respect for human rights; the Convention's implementation must proceed within the framework of the overall human rights programme of the United Nations. Account must be taken of the interdependent nature of human rights-related activities and social and economic development efforts.

The promotion of the rights of the child had come to play a growing part in the Centre's human rights programme, particularly in the programme of advisory services and technical assistance through which the Centre had been helping Governments to meet their responsibilities and obligations under the various human rights instruments. The Centre's information and education activities in the area of the rights of the child were being strengthened and a special issue of the Centre's Human Rights Bulletin focusing on the rights of the child would be issued shortly. The Centre and UNICEF were sponsoring a scholarly work, The Commentary on the Convention, which would help to explain the meaning of the articles of the Convention, and a volume covering the entire legislative history of the Convention was being prepared jointly with Radda Barnen of Sweden.

Given the need for effective coordination within the United Nations human rights programme, the Centre had been encouraging the human rights treaty bodies and the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to give appropriate consideration to the situation of children and to determine how their activities could better contribute to the promotion of children's rights. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights had already called for a joint meeting with other expert committees to discuss their respective contributions to the implementation of the rights embodied in the Convention. The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1991/25, had called for the maintenance of a strong relationship between the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

Turning to the Committee's agenda, he noted that it covered such critical items as the adoption of the rules of procedure, the formulation of reporting guidelines and procedures and practices in respect of the consideration of reports, and ways of establishing cooperation with the specialized agencies, UNICEF and other United Nations organs and competent bodies.

The elaboration of the Convention had taken more than 10 years of concerted efforts, but its effective implementation would obviously take much longer. As the Committee, together with the international community, addressed that daunting task, it was important that States parties should fulfil their commitment to strive for genuine progress. The commitment to progress was also the criterion against which the Committee's efforts would ultimately be measured. Although the progress achieved might never be entirely satisfying, the Committee's activities would undoubtedly make a difference in the lives of children around the world. The Secretariat would do its utmost to facilitate the Committee's work and he wished the Committee every success, now and in the future.

ELECTION OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE

Mr. MARTENSON (Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights) noted that, in accordance with article 43, paragraph 9, of the Convention, the Committee was to elect a Chairman who, along with the other officers, would serve for a term of two years. He called for nominations for the chairmanship of the Committee.

Mrs. SANTOS PAIS suggested that, in view of the need for thorough consultations on the choice of the Chairman, the discussion of agenda item 2 should be deferred until the Committee's next meeting.

Mr. MARTENSON said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Committee wished to adopt that suggestion.

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 11.10 a.m.